Rules of the Game
There, Not There (Part One)
By Skip Williams

The **D&D** game is many things to many people, but on the whole it's an exercise in the imagination. No matter how many pictures or props we use in our games, we still must "see" the game world through our minds' eyes. Sometimes, that proves very difficult indeed. Invisibility is a concept most of us think we understand, but questions about handling unseen creatures always seem to crop up when such creatures enter play (and those questions seem to generate more trouble than the creatures themselves).

Dealing with ethereal, gaseous, or incorporeal things often proves even tougher than dealing with invisibility. How do you wrap your mind around something that you couldn't hold in your hand even if you had it right there with you?

This article examines all four of these curious states of being.

Some Definitions

Here are a few key terms used both in the rules and in this article when discussing the unseen and the real, but largely untouchable.

Adjacent: Two things are adjacent in the **D&D** game when the squares they occupy share a common side or corner. Because of the way the **D&D** game counts distances on the grid, two adjacent things are at least 5 feet apart.

Corporeal: Anything that has a physical body or presence. A creature is corporeal if it does not have the incorporeal subtype.

Ethereal: Present on the Ethereal Plane (see page 151 in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*). Creatures on the Ethereal Plane can see into the Material Plane. Divination spells, such as *see invisibility,* allow a user on the Material Plane to see into the Ethereal. Things of the Material Plane can have some interactions with things on the Ethereal, but because the Material Plane and the Ethereal Plane are two different places, those interactions are severely limited.

Force: A magical descriptor (see Rules of the Game: [Reading Spell Descriptions](#)). Force effects that deal damage can harm incorporeal creatures without the usual miss chance. Force spells cast on the Material Plane can be aimed at, and harm, creatures on the Ethereal Plane. Force barriers block incorporeal and ethereal creatures.

Gaseous: A creature or object whose entire mass is a cloud of gas. When something is gaseous, it's still corporeal, but it can avoid or ignore many physical barriers or hazards.

Incorporeal: A creature subtype. Incorporeal creatures exist without physical bodies and they generally ignore physical barriers and physical dangers. The rules sometimes use the terms ethereal and incorporeal interchangeably, but they are not equivalent (see Part Three and Part Four).

Manifestation: A special quality that allows a ghost (an ethereal creature) to partially enter the Material Plane and function there as an incorporeal creature does.

Miss Chance: A chance, always expressed as a percentage, that an attacker that makes a successful attack roll against a foe misses anyway. Miss chances usually arise because the defender is concealed in some fashion and the attacker does not know exactly where the defender is. A corporeal attacker wielding a magic weapon or spell has a miss chance when attacking an incorporeal foe because whether the magic can do any harm to the incorporeal foe is strictly a matter of chance. (Nonmagical attacks and weaponry cannot harm incorporeal creatures at all.)

Pinpoint: Not a defined game term. When this article speaks of pinpointing an unseen creature, it means determining where on the battlefield that creature is located; most of the time, that's also what the rules mean when they speak of pinpointing a creature. Even after pinpointing a creature, you'll still have a miss chance when you attack it if you can't actually see it (or perceive it through some other means that's at least as acute as vision).

Invisibility

Invisibility is unlike the other three states of being we'll discuss because you really are there (and wholly so) when you don't seem to be. The basics of invisibility include the following:

- When something is invisible, others cannot perceive that thing with vision.

  Vision in this case includes darkvision.

  Nonvisual senses still work with regard to invisible things -- they can be felt, heard, and smelled. Special senses such as blindsight, blindsense, and tremorsense also work with regard to invisible things.

  Certain spells and magical effects, such as *see invisibility* and *true seeing,* allow their users to see invisible things.

  Although the rules don't specifically say so, assume that a creature using a magical invisibility effect is invisible to others but not to itself. This helps avoid arguments about exactly what an invisible creature can do without a penalty. Even if you assume an invisible creature can see itself, it still does not cast a shadow or a reflection (or at least not one most people could notice; see Part Two).

- A magical invisibility effect extends to the user and to all the user's gear.

  Your gear includes everything you wear or carry at the time you receive the invisibility effect; if something sticks out more than 10 feet from you, the portion that extends more than 10 feet is visible.

  If you put down or drop something, that thing becomes visible if it normally is visible.

  If you pick up something visible, that thing stays visible unless you stick it into your clothing. That said, you can reasonably assume that a visible thing becomes invisible if an invisible creature imbibes it.

The rules are unclear about exactly what happens to other creatures that you might hold or carry when you become invisible. In general, you should treat each creature as a separate individual when you consider how any spell or magical effect works. The *invisibility* and *greater invisibility* spells affect one creature only, as does a *ring of invisibility* (which works just like the spell). It's reasonable to make an exception for creatures you carry tucked into your clothing (or that you pick up and tuck into your clothing), and that can include a familiar, cohort, or animal companion if the creature is small enough to fit into your clothing. Of course, if a familiar, cohort, or animal companion has the share spells ability and you (the master) cast an *invisibility* spell on yourself, you can share that spell with the creature.

If you assume an invisible creature can see itself, it also can see any equipment that it carries (unless that equipment is invisible by some means other than merely being in the invisible creature's possession).

- Invisibility effects don't make light invisible.

  When you receive an invisibility effect, any light source you carry still sheds visible light, but the object itself becomes invisible if you're wearing or carrying it when you receive the effect.

  If you pick up a light source while invisible, both the object and the light it sheds remain visible until you tuck it into your clothing, just as any other object does.

  The rules don't explain what happens when you carry a concealed light source when you become invisible. They also don't say what happens if you're invisible and you tuck a light source into your clothing. If you follow the rules to the letter, the concealed light source just keeps right on shining. In that case, it's best to dump any *continual flame* effects you might have tucked away in your gear so that their light won't give you away while you're invisible.

  On the other hand, it's perfectly reasonable to assume that anything that doesn't shed light when you conceal it on your person while visible also doesn't shed light when you conceal it on your person while invisible. So, for example, if you carry a coin with a *continual flame* spell on it in a belt pouch, where it doesn't shed light, it won't start shedding light when you become invisible. If you later pull it out of the pouch, but hold onto it, the coin stays invisible, but it sheds visible light. Later, you can douse the light by putting the coin back into the pouch.

- Invisible creatures cannot use gaze attacks.

  A gaze attack depends on the subject viewing the attacker's face, so your gaze attacks are negated while you're invisible.

  Foes that can see invisible things, such as creatures using the *see invisibility* or *true seeing* spell, remain susceptible to your gaze attacks while you're invisible.

- Invisibility does not foil detection spells.

  A detect spell doesn't make an invisible creature or object visible, but if an unseen subject is in the area where the spell is aimed, the spell can give some hint of the unseen subject's presence. For example, a *detect magic* spell reveals the presence or absence of magical auras in the area where it is aimed. An invisible creature using an *invisibility* spell or magic item has a magical aura (thanks to the active spell or magic item) and a *detect magic* spell aimed into its area will reveal that aura. All the spell user knows, however, is that there is magic present somewhere within the area where the spell is aimed. If the *detect magic* user scans that same area for 3 consecutive rounds, the spell can reveal the location of the invisible magical aura (if the creature is still in area). The spell doesn't reveal anything else about the creature, or even that it is a creature at all. The spell user could aim an attack at the creature's location and have a chance to hit it (see Part Two).

What's Next?

In Part Two, we'll consider the ins and outs of invisibility in combat.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon* *Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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